

Ukraine Elects a New President

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On April 21, 2019, Ukraine held the second round of its first presidential election since 2014, the year Russia occupied Ukraine's Crimea region and fostered a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine. Popular actor-comedian and political novice Volodymyr Zelensky won an overwhelming victory. He defeated incumbent President Petro Poroshenko 73% to 24%. Observers [considered](#) the election to be largely free and fair.

The election outcome suggests that Ukraine's population is highly dissatisfied with politics as usual. Zelensky, 41, ran as an outsider ostensibly untainted by politics or corruption. His political appeal stems in part from his starring role in a popular television show as a beloved schoolteacher who is unexpectedly elected president of Ukraine after a video of him delivering an anticorruption rant goes viral (the show, *Servant of the People*, is available with English subtitles online). One question is whether voters believe Zelensky will be the same kind of president in real life that he depicts on television.

Despite his outsider status, Zelensky did not campaign as a nationalist or populist. On the contrary, Zelensky is a native Russian-speaking Ukrainian, reportedly of Jewish origin, who asserts that he is a firm patriot and supports closer relations with the West. Zelensky is from Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk region, north of Crimea, which observers feared might become another flashpoint of conflict in 2014.

The election results suggest that issues of national and linguistic identity mattered less than many expected. Zelensky demonstrated a broad appeal, coming in first in all but one of Ukraine's regions. Some believed that Zelensky would attract primarily Russian-speaking southern and eastern Ukrainians who reject the alleged corruption and pro-Russian sentiments of many of their traditional elites but who have felt marginalized in Ukrainian politics since 2014. The scale of his victory was especially striking considering that elections could not be held in Russian-occupied Crimea and several districts in eastern Ukraine that the government does not control. This reduced the size of the electorate more likely to support native Russian-speaking candidates.

Zelensky's main opponents ran on more nationalist or populist platforms. Poroshenko has been a strong supporter of Ukraine's integration with the European Union (EU) and NATO, but he unofficially campaigned under a more nationalist [slogan](#) of "Army! Language! Faith!" that appeared on billboards early in the campaign. In addition to seeking credit for Ukraine's closer relations with the West, Poroshenko sought approval as Ukraine's wartime commander in chief and defender of Ukrainian national and religious identity (under his watch, the national Ukrainian Orthodox Church recently received formal independence from the Russian Orthodox Church).

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At the same time, many Ukrainians [believe](#) Poroshenko has not done enough to restore the country's economic health after almost five years of conflict and generally has not lived up to the high expectations for reform that arose from Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity (also known as the Euromaidan protests), which set the stage for his election. A widespread [perception](#) that Poroshenko failed to adequately combat corruption appears to have played a major role in his defeat.

Former prime minister and member of parliament Yulia Tymoshenko, who came in third in the first round, also positioned herself as a pro-Western politician. She ran on a more [populist](#) platform, however, and was critical of government-led economic reforms, including pension reform, increased gas prices, and land sales, supported by the International Monetary Fund, the EU, and the United States. She won 13% in the first round (compared with 30% for Zelensky and 16% for Poroshenko).

Many questions have arisen about Ukraine's future under President-elect Zelensky. His electoral platform was [light](#) on specifics, although he attracted some leading market-oriented economists to his team. Many observers are worried about his lack of foreign policy and leadership experience at a time of ongoing conflict with Russia in eastern Ukraine and the [Kerch Strait](#). Some are concerned that Moscow could convince him to accept a compromise resolution to the conflict that is not in Ukraine's national interests. Others [suggest](#) that Moscow will be less enthusiastic about Zelensky's victory if he brings a new energy to Ukraine's anticorruption and democracy reforms, potentially inspiring a similar kind of movement in Russia.

Observers also [question](#) Zelensky's relationship with wealthy businessperson (or "oligarch") Ihor Kolomoysky, who reportedly controls Ukraine's most popular television station (which airs Zelensky's shows). Kolomoysky served as Dnipropetrovsk's governor until falling out with Poroshenko in 2015. He recently [won](#) a series of court cases regarding the 2016 nationalization of Ukraine's largest commercial bank, which Kolomoysky previously controlled.

The full political significance of Zelensky's victory will not be clear until parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2019. Ukraine has a mixed presidential-parliamentary system, in which the president shares power with a prime minister nominated by parliament. Zelensky's victory is expected to boost the fortunes of his nascent and politically untested party, *Sluha Narodu* (Servant of the People, named after his television show). Ukraine's electorate could fragment before parliamentary elections, however, and a prime minister could emerge from a different party than Zelensky's. This could lead to a different scenario than in the past five years, when the last two prime ministers have been allies of Ukraine's president and perceived as subordinate to him.

It is also unclear how Zelensky's victory will affect Ukraine's relations with the West. U.S. and European governments have supported Ukraine in its conflict with Russia and in its reform efforts. Especially since 2014, the United States has provided significant assistance to Ukraine. For FY2019, Congress appropriated more than \$695 million in aid to Ukraine, including \$115 million in foreign military financing and \$250 million for the Department of Defense-funded Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative. Western governments can be expected to welcome Zelensky as Ukraine's democratically elected leader, as they invite greater clarity about his domestic and foreign policy priorities.

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